

Catholic Rural Movement Issues Manifesto

THE manifesto states that there is abundant scope for positive work of Catholic Action, especially in the problems connected with the breakdown of country family life and the depopulation of the countryside, which, from the viewpoint of the Church, is nothing short of tragedy. Drifting to the city means drifting from Catholic homes to dangers which face youth at every turn. From the skilled and steady work of the farmland, they drift into the ranks of unskilled labourers, who depend on casual work, and must, consequently, live through the numbing days of unemployment and poverty. When they do find permanent employment, they must sacrifice the healthy life of the open fields for the poisonous atmosphere of city workshops. Often, drifting from the country means drifting from God, going the way of the Prodigal Son into the distant city, where he spends his substance living riotously. There are many causes responsible for this exodus, and the remedies to be applied must be suggested by the causes which are at the root of the trouble.

WAY OF LIFE

There are tremendous difficulties to be overcome. The work is not of a day, perhaps not of a generation. Protagonists of commercialised, large-holding farming seem to think the difficulties are insuperable. But they regard farming merely as a source of investment and not as a way of life and a way to heaven. They measure land in terms of pounds, shillings and pence, and not in God-given acres flowing with milk and honey for human consumption. The salvation of Australian rural life will probably not lie in the way of big capitalised farming, or even in what we are familiar with in schemes of closer settlement. A possible solution may be the establishment of small, self-subsisting farming communities, where life is made happy, free, and prosperous under the kindly reign of Christian charity, common sense, and the will and the way to work.

The solution for similar agricultural problems in other countries has been found in the application of Christian principles to country life, and where they have been successfully applied they have been applied by Catholic bodies and organisations pledged to help the man on the land. The work of transforming society is too vast for any isolated individual effort; hence, Catholic Action must be not only an official and specialised apostolate, but an organised apostolate, and that is why groups of Catholic farmers from all parts of Australia came together and formed themselves into members of a National Catholic Rural Movement, which aims at applying the principles of Catholic Action to Australian rural life. As members of this movement, they are no longer alone. They are not only united with the members of the local country groups, or even with all the groups which were represented at the first historic conference of farmers held at Xavier College in February, 1940. They now belong to a world-wide organisation of Catholic laymen, who are farmers, who sought for and found solutions for their problems in Catholic principles, and who, with all the courage which comes from conviction, prayer, and the grace of God, have gone forward fearlessly to bring the world of agriculture to the feet of Christ the Nazarene. Extraordinary success has met their efforts in Holland, Belgium, Canada, U.S.A., and other places.

LOSS OF ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

The problem is not one which deals with one or two aspects of farming life, states the manifesto. It is in the nature of a crisis, for the general paralysis which has affected Australian agriculture in its brief century of existence is one which threatens to destroy the life of the Australian rural community.

At the beginning of the World War in 1914 there were approximately

"To Bring Back Christ to the Countryside"

This week the National Catholic Rural Movement issued an important Manifesto on its principles and aims. The movement was founded in February at a convention of Catholic farmers from many parts of Australia, under the auspices of the National Secretariat of Catholic Action. The 10,000-word document outlines Catholic Action for the farmer, studies the decline of Australian agriculture and rural life and explains the Christian principles which inspire its programme of action. The Manifesto is published by the Australian Catholic Truth Society.

211,000 males engaged in agricultural pursuits in Australia. At the beginning of the present war there were not 190,000. So that in the intervening twenty-five years more than 20,000 men—and many families—have abandoned the life on the land.

The most obvious cause of the disintegration of rural life is econo-

mic. But, states the manifesto, any common sense, that "agriculture" and "industry" are two opposite things, two completely different ways of life. "Agriculture" is concerned fundamentally with man's primeval struggle with the soil; "industry," in modern times, is based on man's attempts—often unsuccessful—to make the machine his servant. It is an undeniable fact that the two ways



"THE AUSTRALIAN COUNTRYSIDE,"

—A photograph by Cozeneaux (from "Australia")

mic. But, states the manifesto, the economic problem, which is common to most modern countries, has features which are peculiar to Australia. The basic trouble with farming in Australia is that it has never been a "way of life" in the sense in which it has been in the Old World. It has been an industry, an exploitation of the soil for money returns. For too many Australians the aim of a life on the land has simply been to find a sure way to an eventual life in the city.

The very words, "agricultural industry," reveal a frame of mind which, in the end, must be destructive of the life on the land. It is a fact, accepted by any person with

of life cannot be merged, cannot be lived side by side. Between the rural and the urban existence there must be made a battle to the death, and, because of the false ideas of the prophets of "progress" in our society, the big battalions have decreed the death of rural life and the drums of victory beat from the mechanical fortresses of our city civilisation.

"THE OVERSEAS MARKET"

Had the founders of Australia wished to evolve a system which must inevitably destroy the nation they pioneered, they could not have done their work more effectively than the work which has been done in Australian agriculture. It is a truism to say that Australian agri-

culture has existed, not for Australia, but as a granary for countries overseas. "The overseas market"—that has always been the objective of Australian farmers, and even today, when the entire rural world is tumbling in ruins, many a farmer thinks that all his problems would be solved if he could fight his way clear of the entanglement of marketing boards, and be allowed to bargain for himself.

There is no such easy solution.

For a variety of causes, ranging from paying inflated prices for land in boom seasons to the necessity of borrowing to tide over difficulties in slump years, the vast majority of our farmers, by means of the everlasting curse of mortgages, have fallen into the hands of financial institutions. Ownership of the farm by the farmer himself is, relatively, a rare thing in Australia. True, his name may be on the title deeds. True, in many instances, he may live a life of real comfort in comparison with the life lived by workers in the city. Nevertheless, if he wants to carry more stock on his land, if he wants to send his children to school for an extra year, in only too many cases it is not the farmer himself who decides those things, but the local bank manager or some obscure clerk in the city office of a wool company.

To believe that the present war is going to make things any better for our rural population would be a cruel error. Wars never make things better. At the best they only stop them getting worse. We must expect policies of economic nationalism to continue. We must not expect to regain the markets we have lost. We must rely on ourselves.

EDUCATION AND RURAL LIFE

The manifesto devotes a chapter to the whole problem of education and its relation to the life on the land. An example of the nature of the problem is given from the remark made recently by a teacher in one of our schools: "X has plenty of brains and ability. It is a great pity that his father intends to take him back on the farm, instead of letting him go in for a profession in the city."

Unfortunately, this attitude is not confined to one teacher or one school. The entire Australian educational system is built up on the idea of preparing boys and girls for a life in the city.

Imagine the case of a boy going to a typical secondary school. In the vast majority of cases he studies languages, English and foreign, history, mathematics, and science. Not one of these fits him in any particular way for the life on the land. Let there should be any misunderstanding of the point aimed at, this does not mean to imply that this broad, cultural training should not be given to those who are destined to spend their lives on the land. On the contrary, it has often been proved that the inclusion of this cultural training is of as much assistance to the young farmer as it is to those engaged in city vocations, as much for the development of initiative which it encourages as for the value of the knowledge itself. Unless he can see his future life on the land as a vocation—an opportunity to love and serve God—the land will remain a harsh tyrant and an enemy.

CONCERN OF THE HIERARCHY

Australian farmers, the manifesto continues, have reason to be grateful to their own Bishops, who have always been strong in their defence of rural life as the real basis of a settled civilisation. The Catholic Agricultural Colleges of Abergowrie (Qld.), Woodlawn and Campbelltown (N.S.W.), and Tardun (W.A.) are not only a tangible sign of what is being done by the Church to stimulate a rural revival in Australia, but are themselves a tribute to the foresight of the Bishops who founded them, and a pledge that their memories will be kept evergreen in the minds and hearts of the Catholic rural communities of Australia.

Programme of the N.C.R.M.

(1) The N.C.R.M. aims to give to the vast, unorganised mass of farmers the same strength, unity, and cohesion as men in cities get by organising in companies and associations.

(2) By gradually evolving and developing policies aiming at commonsense plans of farm settlement, it aims to bring economic security to farmers and farm labourers, and enable them to become economically independent.

(3) One of the greatest activities of the movement will be campaigns to reveal to the rural community the principles of true co-operation.

Unfortunately, the manifesto notes, past attempts at co-operation in Australia have not been a uniform success, owing to a variety of causes. Chief among these causes were the facts that in the majority of cases they were not real co-operatives which were organised, but actually private joint-stock ventures, in which the profit of the shareholders was the prime objective. Secondly, and even more important, was the complete lack of any education in co-operation among those who participated in even those co-operative ventures which were genuine.

(4) Among the other great objectives of the N.C.R.M. as an organisation is the protection, in the political sphere,

of the rural community which it represents. The relation of the N.C.R.M. to party politics should be clearly understood from the beginning. As an organisation, the N.C.R.M. is completely outside the political sphere, and this principle of non-participation in party politics will always be maintained.

This rigid abstention from the arena of party politics has reference, of course, only to the N.C.R.M. as an organisation, but it is a prohibition which applies also to all those who occupy a high administrative or directive position in the organisation. Other individual members of the N.C.R.M., in their capacity as private citizens, of course, do not come within the discipline of the organisation to this extent, and in this respect are able to act as they wish.

(5) The present policy of the N.C.R.M. is summed up in two things: the first is a determined effort to found rural groups in every country district throughout Australia. The second is that once these groups have undergone their preliminary training, and have been granted official affiliation by the movement, they should begin a move to include all Catholics in the district in the N.C.R.M. This twofold policy sums up the instructions which have been issued to regional secretaries.

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